

Book Review

A Review of *Notebooks*, B. F. Skinner

Edited, and with an Introduction by Robert Epstein

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At a time in his career when most of B. F. Skinner's writing is directed toward his autobiographical series, with Volumes 1 and 2 now published and Volume 3 well underway, *Notebooks* makes available a wide range of Skinner's behavioral observations which might never have reached a public audience in any other way. Epstein, in his Introduction, states that these notes were selected and published to accomplish certain objectives "... in elaborating or clarifying Skinner's work, in exploring new territory, or in shedding light on Skinner himself." These objectives are well met.

The book will not, however, provide much of a picture of Skinner as an artist at work, principally because of Epstein's participation in selecting and editing the material and by virtue of Skinner's having recently revised many of the notes for the purpose of this publication. Such factors led Epstein to indicate his doubt as to the "historical value" of the material, but that may be too critical. It is true that Epstein's role precludes one, say, from preparing a thematic taxonomy to reflect the relative frequency with which Skinner wrote on a given topic. Such a ranking would require that the notes in *Notebooks* were randomly selected from all Skinner's notes, of which hundreds and perhaps thousands remain unpublished. Neither can you study the development of the notes thematically or grammatically, since many of them were recently "finished" for publication. In fact, it is possible that Epstein contributed material as well, although presumably only as editorial suggestions.

These factors, however, do not remove the book from serious scholarly consideration. The careful indexing and dating of the several hundred notes allows the reader to quickly review and compare their contents with related works, and there are issues in these notes addressed in ways which do not appear elsewhere. For example, there are several notes related to the analysis of dreams. It is true, though, that the first impression of a reader is likely to be the simple enjoyment that comes from reading bits of articulate, insightful behaviorism by the acknowledged master thereof. (It helps, of course, and as usual with Skinner, if you are fluent in French.)

Notebooks does share a feature common to all Skinner's works, that of becoming increasingly meaningful as the level of the reader's behavioral expertise grows. While it may just require an introductory psychology grasp of ratio reinforcement schedules to appreciate Skinner's analysis in a note like The Don Juan Principle (p. 181), several other notes may make sense only to those familiar with Skinner's *Verbal Behavior* (1957), e.g., A Nonverbal Autoclitic (p. 282). Happily, and probably by careful design, there is such a wide range of topics and levels of analyses that even those whose knowledge of behavior theory consists solely of a curiosity about how anyone could possibly think seriously in such terms will discover items of interest. For example, there is Skinner's musing about the meaning of one of his dreams (p. 238), his account of a night in a topless bar in San Francisco (p. 138), and an observation of traffic control in Cambridge (p. 272-273).

As you might suppose, there is plenty of behavioral advice, both individual and cultural, as well. For example, in the note

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Physician, Heal Thyself (p. 5-6), he tells of writing a Boston sports reporter to suggest that baseball managers show positive examples on videotape of batting performance rather than errors to help correct a player's slump. Presumably this advice was passed along in 1972 when the note was written. I recently saw a nearly identical program presented as a marvelous new form of "sports therapy" on an ABC TV show. Probably not a coincidence.

Nevertheless, the more you do know about behaviorism, the better you will appreciate this book. The fun of many of the notes gives way to the serious, although equally enjoyable business of studying Skinner as the pre-eminent behaviorist. And, as Epstein states, there is ground breaking material in this book as well as reflections and reconceptualizations of previous positions. For example, consider the following note:

Deep Structure

An account in the Sunday Times suggests to me that Chomsky's deep structure is what I have been calling primordial verbal behavior—before autocalitics are added. At least that is true of the examples given in the article.

One "Psychologist" is said to have argued that the developing child feels a "language pressure." What is felt are the growing demands of a verbal community to which the child's verbal behavior becomes more important.

But deep structure is really the nonverbal situation giving rise to verbal behavior, rather than the primordial responses which first appear.

While other behaviorists, such as Segal (1977) and Catania (1979) have attempted to develop or at least indicate the linkages between Skinner's account of verbal behavior and contemporary psycholinguistic theory, Skinner himself has tended to remain somewhat aloof from such efforts. Here in this note is at least an important bridge, albeit one which has the effect of removing "deep structure" from the organism and placing it in environmental contingencies. This, of course, may not be a topic which will interest a lot of readers, but it is an example

of the kind of issue that *Notebooks* offers time and again.

Yet there is more than intellectual enjoyment in this book. Its breadth and depth remind us again what incredible contributions B. F. Skinner has made to the science of behavior. This remains true when we focus our admiration on the behavior, not the person, as he would obviously prefer. Perhaps more importantly, the book also reminds us of all that remains to be done. One note is called *Fields to Conquer* and begins:

Almost every day I run across something to which I could give a year of my life. Just now, reading Clark's *Life of Bertrand Russell*, the passage on Russell's first contact with Peano reminds me of my old project—a behavioral analysis of autocalitics.

If, then

Either, or

All

Some

Is contained in

There exists (assertion as autocalitic!)

We need to examine the contingencies from which the rules governing these expressions are "extracted." (Dangerous word!)

As it happens, I have a copy of the original note, and at the risk of publicly reversing what obviously was a deliberate editorial decision, let me give the title and beginning sentence of that note as it was first written, March 10, 1976.

Followers

Where are the young men who will carry on what needs to be done?

Notebooks surely will remind those who can "carry on" both what has been and all that yet needs to be done, and should attract others to the task as well.

REFERENCES

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- Segal, E. F. Toward a coherent psychology of language. In W. K. Honig & J. E. R. Staddon (Eds.) *Handbook of operant behavior*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977.
- Skinner, B. F. *Verbal behavior*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957.